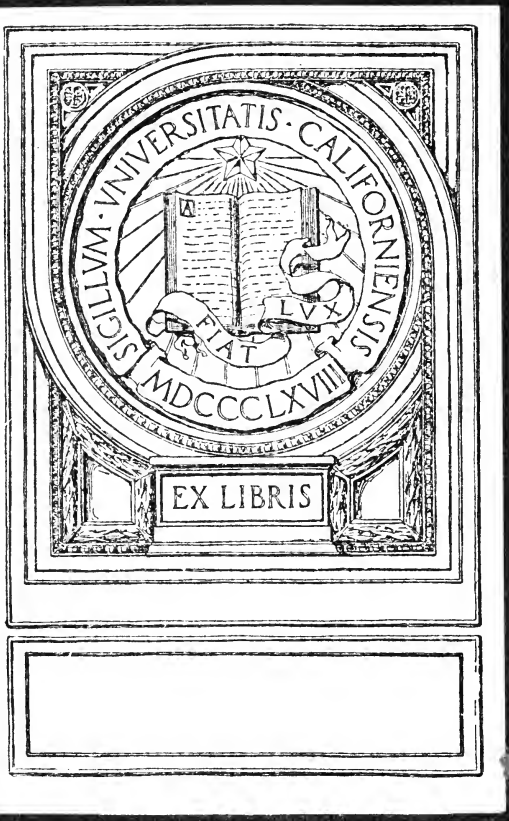
SIGILLVM · VNIVERSITATIS · CALIFORNIENSIS
LVX
FIAT
MDCCCLXVIII
EX LIBRIS

University of Adelaide

COMMEMORATION ADDRESS

1919

DEMOCRACY

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

BY

PROFESSOR G. C. HENDERSON

M.A. (OXON)

ADELAIDE: G. HASSELL & SON

1920

University of Adelaide

COMMEMORATION ADDRESS

1919

DEMOCRACY

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

BY

PROFESSOR G. C. HENDERSON

M.A. (OXON)

ADELAIDE: G. HASSELL & SON

1920

THE ARGUMENT.

Need for an inquiry into the generally accepted definition of democracy.

Brief review of so-called democratic governments in ancient and modern times.

The value of leadership and management in war, politics, and industry.

The dangers inherent in the acceptance of a misleading definition of democracy.

The duty of the people is not to govern, but to select men who can govern and to control them.

Comparison between the Executive in Great Britain and the United States.

Our working constitution takes the form of an aristo-democracy rather than a democracy.

The British Constitution commended:

1. Because it has been evolved from experience and reflection upon experience.
2. Because of its intrinsic worth.

Under the British Constitution a majority of the people can get any change they desire without recourse to direct action or revolution.

DEMOCRACY

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

In the addresses delivered before the last two Commemorations the Professor of Chemistry and the Professor of Philosophy used their special knowledge to elucidate problems arising out of the war. I propose to follow their lead, in trying to explain the difference between a working and a theoretical democracy.

One of the avowed objects of the war was to make the world safe for democracy. Before we can do that we must be clear in our minds as to what we mean by democracy. The war is over, and military autocracy has been overthrown; but that form of government which we have agreed to call democracy is not safe. A new foe has arisen, and it is the more dangerous because it masquerades in various parts of the world as democracy itself.

Inaccurate Definition of Democracy.

Theorists have been telling us for two centuries that democracy is government for the people by the people. In my study of history I cannot find that any such government has ever existed. That democracy has meant government for the people I have no doubt; but that it has ever meant government by the people, or means that now, I am forced to deny. That it will ever mean that, so long as men are born with unequal capacities, and are disciplined in different environments, I cannot believe.

Difference between Controlling and Governing.

It is true that people have sometimes controlled their rulers in the past, and that in the more enlightened countries of the world they have devised political machinery for controlling them more effectively. But there is a vast difference between actual governance and the control of those who govern. The number of men in any nation who have the capacity for the administration of great affairs is very small; the number of men and women who control them in the exercise of their powers may be reckoned by hundreds of thousands or millions, according to the size of the State. Yet so loose is the language we use in reference to government that the distinction between governing and the control of those who govern is overlooked or ignored. We live in an age of catch-words and shibboleths, and one of the most misleading and powerful of these is "government for the people by the people."

The Test of Experience in History.

History is the record of human experience, and the best way to explode a shibboleth of this kind is to bring it to the test of experience. Theorists in the matters of government have nearly always paid too much homage to logic and too little to the importance of passion, prejudice, habit, and tradition. Some, like the anarchists, assume that men are so good that they do not need to be governed at all, and some, like the Bolshevist, that the poorer and more inexperienced they are the better they can manage human affairs. Nearly all of them fail to reckon with the difference between ideas that will work and theories that will merely create unrest or overturn the existing order. A course of study in the history of government would dispel many of these illusions. The student of history needs insight, imagination, and enthusiasm in the prosecution of his work just as

other students do. But he has to deal with men as they are, not as they ought to be, and he must never lose sight of the importance of common sense, and a sense of proportion, in discussing the control and management of great affairs.

What then has history to tell of that form of government which we call democracy?

The Athenian Democracy.

The nearest approach to government for the people by the people may be found at Athens in the middle of the fifth century before Christ. The *Ecclesia* or Assembly was composed of all the citizens over 18 years of age, and had the power to declare war, change the constitution, and control executive officers. The Council that prepared agenda for the Assembly contained 500 reputable citizens over 30 years of age chosen every year by lot. It controlled finance and foreign affairs. Laws were made and administered in Jury Courts consisting of men over 30 years of age chosen by lot from year to year. To this extent the government of Athens was government by the people. But look closer at it, and you will find that two-thirds of the people were slaves, that the most serious crimes—murder and arson—were dealt with by the *Areopagus*, not by the *Heliaea*, that the chief administrative officers who had to prepare plans to meet emergencies were chosen, not by lot, but by show of hands, and that they were often re-elected. Pericles was general for 15 years. In the Athenian democracy the citizens exercised rigorous control over their generals, and even did some of the administrative work; but for all that the important business of state was transacted not by the people but by the generals under Pericles, who was the real ruler of Athens from 445 to 430 B.C. If you have any doubt about this read the account of his administration in the second book of Thucydides, who

tells us that "though in name it (Athens) was a democracy, in fact it was a government administered by the first man."

Nor must we ever forget that Athens was a city-state. A flag was hoisted in the morning at the meeting place, and the citizens assembled during the day. How very different are our modern democracies, which include millions of people scattered over wide areas! It is only by means of representation that modern nations can make any form of democratic government possible. Even in Athens a man who lived in the country could not be a member of the *Heliaea*.

Representative Government in England.

England has enjoyed representative government since 1295, but I know of no period in the history of that country when there was government for the people by the people. It is true that the people always exercised some control over their governors through the House of Commons; but in the fourteenth century the actual government was carried on by the king in his Ordinary and Perpetual Council; in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth by the king and his Privy Council, and in the eighteenth by a double Cabinet, one directed by the king, the other by the chief minister responsible to Parliament.

Cabinet Government in the Nineteenth Century.

But, you will say, a great change came with the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884-5. That is true. Since 1832 the people have had more control over ministers than ever before; but is it not also true that Great Britain in the last century has been governed by a few selected men? The Privy Council has given way to the Cabinet, and the Cabinet must have the confidence of a majority of the people's representatives in Par-

liament; but it is the Cabinet that governs the country, and within that Cabinet there is an inner ring of strong and capable men, who have more to do with the actual government of Great Britain than all the millions who have voted to send them there. Great Britain is moving rapidly toward adult franchise, and that is one result of important developments in the last century. There is another in the consolidation of the power of the Cabinet as an instrument of government. So great has the power of the British Cabinet become in our time that exponents of our working constitution sometimes find it difficult to decide whether the Cabinet controls the House or the House the Cabinet.

Whatever be the truth on this point, there can be no doubt that the British Cabinet has acquired enormous power as an executive instrument, and that the government which prevails in Great Britain and the Dominions to-day is not government for the people by the people, but government for the people by a few selected men whom the electors control through the House of Representatives. That is the form of government which we have agreed to call democracy; democracy as we find it actually working, not as the theorists have defined it; democracy as we find it in history, and as we are likely to find it in the future.

Let us bring the matter to the test of common sense.

The Test of Common Sense.

The majority of people in this hall have the right to vote, and therefore to exercise some control over ministers through the Assembly on North Terrace; but how much do we who sit here have to do with the actual administration of State affairs? And this is only a small State, in which nearly half the population live in one

city. How much more ridiculous is this notion of popular government in a nation of millions of people!

Think of Great Britain and the Empire in the past five years. What share have the mass of the people had in the administration of affairs compared with the members of the British Cabinet? Is it not infinitesimal? And is it not true of all those countries which we call democratic that it is the few who govern, and that all the people do is to select and control them? Of course if those ministers do not retain the confidence of the majority of the people's representatives in Parliament they will have to resign and give way to another ministry that will rule in accordance with the will of the people. But that does not mean that the people govern, it only means that the Cabinet, which is the chief executive instrument of democratic countries, is appointed and dismissed by the people. As a form of national government theoretical democracy does not exist, and never has.

The Modern Industrial Democracy.

The history of industrial democracy confirms what I have said of political democracy. Turn to the history of trades union government in England, and you will see how, in spite of the plainest facts to the contrary, the authors of paper constitutions have clung to the conviction that democracy is government by the people. Sidney and Beatrice Webb have written one of the most authoritative works on the subject.* On pages 28-32 of the first volume they discuss the government of the Shipbuilders' and Boilermakers' Society, as it is in theory and in fact.

The Shipbuilders' and Boilermakers' Society.

In the formal constitution of that Society provision was made for all the devices usually adopted by those

*"Industrial Democracy."

who think people can govern as well as control: rapidly changing executive, rotation of office, aggregate votes of branches in mass meetings assembled. But what of the actual working of that constitution? The authors give us the answer in these words: "Although the executive meeting, the branch meeting, and the referendum occupy the main body of the Society's rules, the whole policy has long been directed, and the whole administration conducted exclusively by an informal Cabinet of permanent officials which is unknown to the printed constitution. Twenty years ago the Society had the good fortune to elect as General Secretary Mr. Robert Knight, a man of remarkable ability and strength of character, who has remained the permanent premier of this little kingdom. . . . . In effect the General Secretary and his informal Cabinet were, until the change in 1895, absolutely supreme."

There is no need to multiply instances. Turn wheresoever you may in this world's history, you will find in the conduct of industrial, municipal, state, national, and imperial affairs, government for the people by the people is a delusion.

It has also been, and still is, a snare.

Value of Management and Leadership.

A. In War.

One very great mistake underlying this definition of democracy is the assumption that the qualities of management and leadership are common. They are, in fact, exceedingly rare. It is only one man in 10,000 who possesses them. The rulers of men not only make plans to prepare for future contingencies; that is comparatively easy; they must also be able to modify their plans after the emergency has arisen, and mould circumstances as they go, and that is difficult. They need insight and

initiative in the hour of crisis, as well as foresight in preparing for it. When events are moving rapidly they must be able to see at a flash what is the right thing to do, and lose no time in doing it. They must be able to exert a power similar to that which Cromwell used at Marston Moor, Nelson at Cape St. Vincent, and Napoleon in nearly every battle that he fought. And how much has been accomplished in this world under such leaders as they! How little by armies badly led! What terrible disasters overtook the leaderless hosts that first left Europe for the conquest of the Holy Land in the Middle Ages!

B. IN POLITICS.

The value of management in war is generally recognized; but it holds good in statesmanship too. How much does the British Empire owe in this last great struggle to the initiative, resource, and courage of Mr. Lloyd George who handled the financial problem with success in the early days of the war, settled strike after strike, overcame the difficulty about munitions, and, in the teeth of fierce opposition, brought all the armies of the Allies under one supreme command?

C. IN INDUSTRY.

Great, too, is the value of competent direction in industrial affairs. There are plenty of labouring men who believe honestly that it is they who create wealth, and that management has little to do with it. The history of the Revolution in Russia is teaching the world something very different. But we do not need to go beyond our own State for an argument. In his admirable lecture on "The Humanizing of Industry," Mr. Gerald Mussen, speaking of the smelters at Port Pirie, told us that "if a committee of workmen owned the smelters, and ran them, and, say, 20 experts were with-

drawn, the production of lead would probably not total more than 10,000 tons a year. If the 20 experts then returned and took charge with exactly the same plant, and exactly the same labour force, their production would be what it is at present—about 150,000 tons a year."

This will be hard reading for the rank and file of labour in Australia to-day; but it will not surprise the historian who remembers the condition into which England sank under the administration of the Duke of Newcastle, and how she rose again after a few years from a third-rate to a first-rate power under the inspiring and able leadership of William Pitt. The same constitution, the same people, but a thorough change in management.

Edmund Burke's Opinion.

It matters not what form of government you take, success will depend very largely upon efficient management. "Constitute government how you please," says Burke, "infinitely the greater part of it must depend upon the exercise of the powers which are left at large to the prudence and uprightness of ministers of state. Even all the use and potency of laws depends upon them. Without them your commonwealth is no better than a scheme upon paper, not a living, active, effective constitution."*

Happy the country that can always find great leaders in the hour of stress and storm! Woe to the country that affords little scope for the development of men with initiative, insight, judgment, and creative ability!

The Danger inherent in Misleading Shibboleths.

And unless the fallacy underlying this shibboleth, government for the people by the people, is exposed, there is some danger that representatives will be reduced

*"Present Discontents."

to the condition of delegates, and statesmen to the level of politicians. So long have the people been flattered with misleading statements about equality that it is no wonder they have underrated the value of management, and essayed to take the direction of affairs into their own hands sometimes. Almost immediately after the second Reform Bill was passed in 1867 big political organizations were formed in the larger industrial centres in Great Britain. The Birmingham Liberal Association was followed by the National Liberal Association, and in 1877 there was a national union of Conservatives.

Experience in the Nineteenth Century.

These associations claimed the right not only to select candidates for Parliament, but also to draw up definite programmes for adoption, such as the famous "Newcastle Programme" in 1891. Had they succeeded in their aim members of Parliament would have had little more to do than carry out the mandates of organizations outside Parliament. All those who believe with Edmund Burke that representatives owe their judgment as well as their voice to their constituents, will be pleased to know that, in this particular aim, the associations failed. The leaders of the political party in Parliament found their restrictions too burdensome, and incompatible with the self-respect of men who aspired to lead and direct the nation in the assembly that represented all the people, and not merely a section. In the British Parliament it is the party leaders, and not the political associations of the electorates, that decide party policy, and rule the country in fact as well as in theory.

Need for Safeguarding the Sovereignty of Parliament.

That is all to the good. Had the issue gone the other way it is difficult to see how the prestige and authority of the greatest of our institutions could have

been maintained, and a clash of sovereignty averted. In the seventeenth century the greatest revolution in British history arose out of a contest between Parliamentary authority and the rule of a king who claimed to derive his power from a source outside the constitution. In our time there are organizations unknown to the constitution that have essayed to challenge, and even to defy the authority of Parliament; and unless we make up our minds whether we are to be ruled constitutionally by Cabinet, or unconstitutionally by demagogues, very serious trouble may arise. There is an old adage handed down to us from the Middle Ages that if two men ride on horseback one must ride in front. In Great Britain and the Dominions the reins of government have for over a century been in the hands of Cabinet Ministers. They hold them now with firmer hand than ever before. On them devolves the chief responsibility for safeguarding the prestige of Parliamentary government which has helped to make our race so powerful in the world.

Need for Popular Control of Ministers.

But while it is well to entrust our duly constituted leaders with supreme authority in the conduct of national affairs, history teaches that it is right and necessary to keep them under constitutional control, and it is clear from the extension of the franchise since 1832 that British people have made up their minds to do so. There are some people who argue that a board of experts could manage the country's affairs much more cheaply and efficiently than a Cabinet dependent upon Parliament. Perhaps they could—for a time, and then, if members of the board went the customary way of bureaucracies and oligarchies in the past, they would become selfish and corrupt, and, in the absence of constitutional control, it would require a revolution to remove them. Revolu-

tion involving great expenditure in blood and treasure is too heavy a price to pay for increased efficiency, valuable as that is.

The Evolution of Cabinet Government.

It is not at all likely that British peoples will ever allow their executive to get out of hand again. They undertook two revolutions in the seventeenth century to get the principle of control recognized, and it took them a hundred and fifty years to devise the political machinery by which it was made effective. That is the meaning of the triumph of the Cabinet over the old Privy Council. The Privy Council was responsible to the king who ruled by prerogative in the seventeenth century, and by "influence" in the eighteenth. Cabinet ministers are responsible to a majority of the people's representatives in Parliament, and hold office only as long as they retain their confidence. That is how the harmony between the Legislature and the Executive has been secured.

It seems simple, but it is a matter of far-reaching importance. It was not suggested by any theorist, it was evolved from experience, and it is the chief distinguishing characteristic of the British Constitution, and gives to it that organic character which enables it to effect changes from within. The principle of growth is in itself.

Government in Britain and the United States Compared.

Tested by essentials the government of Great Britain and the Dominions is far more democratic than that of the United States. It is more flexible, and responds much more quickly to the influence of public opinion. The President of the United States is appointed for four years, and the failure of the impeachment of Samuel Johnson in 1868 proved that it is well night impossible to

remove him within that time. He appoints his own Cabinet ministers, and they are responsible to him, not to the House of Representatives. This may, and probably does mean that the Executive in the United States can act more decisively than the British Cabinet; but it means, too, that harmony between the Legislature and the Executive has been far more thoroughly assured in Great Britain than in the United States. The Government of Great Britain is more organic than the Government of the United States, which still preserves the character of a system of checks and balances. The men who drew up the United States Constitution showed a deep distrust of public opinion. The British Constitution is a contrivance for giving effect to the will of the people at any time. Few, if any, of the American republics that have adopted the presidential executive of the United States have escaped civil war or dictatorship. The British system leaves no reasonable excuse for either.

The Danger inherent in our System.

The danger for us does not lie in the lack of control of ministers. There is no possibility now of a Duke of Buckingham leading his country to failure after failure in defiance of Parliament. Our danger lies rather in the enfeeblement of the Executive by excessive criticism through the press and public meetings, and interference from organized public opinion in the electorates, as well as a want of scope for the exercise of initiative and judgment inside Parliament because of the lavish promises made in electioneering campaigns, and the pressure which is brought to bear on Parliamentary leaders by caucus and other organizations unknown to the Constitution. The further this goes the nearer we approach to ochlocracy, and the further we wander away from the true principles of British democratic government.

Our Government really an Aristo-democracy.

I sometimes think it is a pity that we have not a more suitable word to describe the form of government under which we live. "Democracy" means government by the people, and there is no part of the word to suggest the importance of the aristocratic element in our working Constitution. It is true in British communities that public opinion is the political sovereign; adult franchise has been conceded; but the executive, which is the most important part of government, is directed by the *aristoi*—not the *aristoi* of wealth or blood, but the best men available for carrying on the government in the interests of the people at large.

There is a combination of popular and aristocratic principles in our working Constitution, and both principles have been emphasized in the political development of the last century. Adult suffrage has made popular control more effective than ever it was, but the Cabinet has never been so powerful as it is to-day. "Aristo-democracy" is an awkward compound, but at least the word expresses more accurately the government under which we live than "democracy."

A True Definition of British Democracy.

But if we choose to retain the more familiar term we ought to recognize that there is a clear distinction between its derivative and its applied meaning, and that in Great Britain and the self-governing Dominions the form of government which we call democracy is not government for the people by the people, but government for the people by a few selected men whom the people control through their representatives in Parliament. Theoretical democracy is a delusion and a snare, but the working constitution under which the people of the self-governing Dominions of the British Empire are living is, in its

essential principles, admirable. It provides all the machinery that is needed for selecting and controlling men who are fitted by nature and training for leadership and management, and as Taussig says, in his great work on the "Principles of Economics," "all progress, material and spiritual, depends on the selection of the right leaders, and on spurring them on to the best exercise of their faculties." Government is not the business of the people; they have not, and never will have the time, opportunity, training, and ability for it. The responsibility that rests upon them is to choose and control the few who can govern, and democratic nations will stand or fall according to the manner in which they discharge it. The best constitution in the world will not save us from decline or disaster if the people are too ignorant or too perverse to choose and support capable and reliable leaders and reject mere irresponsible talkers and vote hunters.

With this all-important reflection in my mind, I would venture to commend our working Constitution to your jealous care.

The British Constitution Rooted in Experience.

It is the final result of a long process of evolution, and just because of that you cannot, even if you would, break suddenly away from it without serious embarrassment, and even great peril. You may discard a theory at a moment's notice, but the British Constitution is rooted deep in the experience of our race, and has broadened down from precedent to precedent. It is not a scheme upon paper, sprung from the brain of theorists. Theory has had very little to do with it; experience and thought reacting upon experience, nearly everything. It is a growth, not a sudden acquisition, and just for that reason it is likely to be so well adjusted to the temper

and capacity of the people at large that any attempt to replace it by the cut-and-dried schemes of logicians and theorists will assuredly bring on a reaction. It has always been so in the past. Great upheavals are followed by periods of unrest and change; but the continuity of history is never lost. When the wave of revolution has swept by, the habits of a nation, which are called traditions, have asserted their power. Reaction has followed revolution for some time, and after that the people have settled down to the task of making bottles for the new wine that is worth preserving. Evolution does not always proceed at the same rate in human affairs; it is sometimes rapid, sometimes slow; but there is evolution, and it is more persistent in constitutional than in any other branch of British history.

Our age is in love with novelty and experiment, not only in the art of government, but in nearly all branches of art. Post-impressionism and cubism are almost as extreme as some of the more advanced theories of Anarchists and Bolshevists. They carry one principle so far that other principles, equally true, if brought to the test of experience and common sense, are abandoned or forgotten. It is likely that most of these theories in art and government will have their day and cease to be. They will not fail of some effect; the old order is bound to be modified and changed to some extent; but in matters of government tradition is so powerful that I shall be very much mistaken if Bolshevism of the twentieth century does not go the way of Communism and Anarchy of the nineteenth, and Antinomianism and Fifth Monarchism of the seventeenth century. Any "ism" is good enough to make a few converts; but unless it strikes its roots deeper than intellect it is not likely to live long. Institutions and systems that endure derive their nourishment from habit, feeling, and tradition, and all that goes to make up experience.

But it is not enough to argue that our working constitution is venerable. It has often happened in this world's history that systems have outlived their usefulness, and some constitutions have been deservedly overthrown.

Its Intrinsic Worth.

I commend to you the working constitution of Great Britain and the Dominions, because of its intrinsic worth. Something I have said about this already, but let me add now that I can conceive of no better machinery by which an enlightened people may make use of the best managers in the community, and at the same time keep them true to a sense of their national responsibility. It avoids the extremes of autocracy and ochlocracy. It sweeps aside the fantastic notion that men are born with equal capacity for government; but provides all the machinery that is needed for keeping the best talent available employed in national work. I say the best available, because we must not assume that the most capable administrators in the community are willing to submit themselves for election to Parliament. Such a constitution can fail only if the people as a whole prove themselves unequal to the task of encouraging the right men to undertake national responsibilities. What more can you ask of any constitution suited to the temper of a democratic people?

Remember that it is not only by widening the franchise that you make a constitution democratic. Germany had a liberal franchise before this war; but the executive in Germany was practically independent of the House of Representatives, and Germany was therefore an autocracy. When the Chancellor in Germany is made responsible to the Reichstag, as the Prime Minister is to the British House of Commons, then Germany will be a democracy. Whether Germany will attain to this re-

mains to be seen. The character of the people and the conditions under which they are to live will ultimately determine the nature of their working constitution. But it is certain that she will bring the executive more into harmony with the legislature. So will Russia, Austria, and Hungary.

For them the only way to this reform has been by revolution. Thanks to the Puritan leaders in the seventeenth century, and Whig statesmen in the eighteenth, we are more fortunate.

The Greatest Merit of the British Constitution.

One of the greatest merits of our working constitution—perhaps the greatest—is that direct action and revolution within the State are no longer necessary for any reform whatsoever. If the majority of the people are determined on change, there is no reason why they should not get it in a regular constitutional way, and that is infinitely better and more worthy of rational beings than having recourse to brute force and violence.

Apart from the suffering and slaughter of innocent beings, unavoidable in revolutions, victories won by force are not so enduring as those that come by reason and arbitration. Bismarck put his trust in blood and iron, and he was remarkably successful for a time. But what has become of his work now? I commend to you the advice of a greater builder of nations and empires than Bismarck. When his soldiers were clamouring for direct action in the middle of the seventeenth century Cromwell, the leader of the Ironsides who never lost a battle, said: "I could wish that we might remember this always, that what we gain in a free way, it is better than twice as much in a forced, and will be more truly ours and posterity's." Cromwell was no sentimentalist, he was speaking from experience—

an experience of violent and of reasonable methods far deeper than that of the impetuous demagogues of to-day.

Revolutions Superfluous and Unjustifiable.

If we lived under a theocracy, autocracy, or oligarchy, or even under the constitution of the United States, there might be some justification for violent measures; but how can violence be justified when the people are able to get the government they want every three years, or even within a single year? If there is anything unsatisfactory in the written constitution under which we live, the people can amend it to their own liking, subject only to approved safeguards against ill-considered tampering. All that is needed is that the people shall make up their minds. In Great Britain and the Dominions the political sovereign is public opinion.

The time has not yet come when the world can hope to dispense with war between one nation and another; the League of Nations and the International Court of Arbitration are only in their infancy. But the time has come when everyone of the self-governing nations under the British flag may decide that civil war shall be a thing of the past. The great purpose of constitutional machinery is to enable us to attain by regular, orderly methods what the world has been accustomed to get by violence. I do not say that there will never be civil war again in the British Dominions. I do say that there is no need for it, and that there is nothing which we can hope to attain by war within the State that cannot be secured more thoroughly and permanently by making use of the Constitution that our forefathers have handed down to us.

G. HASSELL & SON,
PRINTERS & PUBLISHERS,
CURRIE ST. ADELAIDE.